

CHARACTER TRAINING IN SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

BY J. V. NASH

EVER since the close of the World War the problem of character training in our schools and colleges has been one of increasing concern. At the Minneapolis Convention of the National Education Association, in the summer of 1928, it was a leading topic of discussion among the educators gathered from all parts of the country. "Emphasis must be placed," declared one speaker, "on honesty rather than on accuracy. Academic subject matter may be the means to an end, but never the end itself." Press dispatches from Chautauqua, N. Y., July 22, reported Ernest C. Hartwell, superintendent of schools at Buffalo, as urging, in an address before the Chautauqua Summer Schools, the vital necessity of an educational system "which would stress the development of character and high ideals rather than merely retail facts."

Professor A. A. Stagg, the veteran Director of Physical Education at the University of Chicago, in a recent talk pointed out the seriousness of this problem. Speaking of the destructive effects on home life caused by the war, he said:

"There seems to be a little less loyalty to the home ties on the part of fathers and mothers than there was before the war. The children naturally have suffered. The fact is that many children—thousands of children—now are getting very little home direction. Luxury and pleasure have been exalted, and the fathers and mothers to a certain extent have run away from their duties and responsibilities. The children have become free to an extent that they never were before. They have a freedom which is away beyond any of us ever dreamed we might have. . . . It is no wonder that the standards have been changed. No one should blame the children. We are to blame—we fathers and mothers—for the situation."¹

¹ Address on "The Training of Men," Chicago, June 26, 1927.

The problem of character training has been put squarely up to our educational institutions; and if the schools and colleges do not solve it, we shall have growing up a generation sadly lacking in moral responsibility and social usefulness.

Let us take, first, our high schools. How shall we approach the problem of character training in the high school? In the beginning, we must understand what is meant by moral or ethical instruction. John Dewey distinguishes between "moral ideas" and "ideas about morality." Moral ideas he defines as "ideas of any sort whatsoever which take effect in conduct and improve it, make it better than it otherwise would be." Ideas about morality, on the other hand, "may be morally indifferent or immoral or moral. There is nothing in the nature of ideas *about* morality, of information *about* honesty or charity or kindness which automatically transmutes such ideas into good character or good conduct."² This distinction he believes is a fundamental one in the discussion of moral education.

Hence, according to Dewey, "The business of the educator is to see to it that the greatest possible number of ideas acquired by children and youth are acquired in such a vital way that they become moving ideas, motive-forces in the guidance of conduct." In other words, the end in view is pragmatic, not mere edification. The moral purpose should be dominant in all instruction, regardless of the subject, "because the ultimate purpose of all education is character forming."³

Naturally, the attention of student and teacher must be centered much of the time upon purely intellectual matters, but Dewey is convinced that it is possible to have the methods of learning, of acquiring intellectual power, and of assimilating the material, so organized that they will have a constructive and invigorating effect upon behavior. And in order that real character training may result from instruction, it is necessary that the methods should not be confined to successful absorption on the part of the student. If the larger part of the learning process consists simply in a group of forty children reading the same books and reciting the same lessons, there is no social division of labor, no opportunity for each student to work out something of his own which will call forth his interest and desire to achieve. Through such a technique the social spirit

² John Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education*, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

is not cultivated, and the cultivation of the social spirit should be the basis of character training. The youth has an innate desire to create, to do things, and to serve. This instinct must be given an opportunity for expression; otherwise it will decay and in its place selfish individualistic motives will be given free play. As Dewey expresses it: "Separation between instruction and character continues in our schools (in spite of the efforts of individual teachers) as a result of the divorce between learning and doing."⁴

It is therefore important that the various subjects in the curriculum should be presented, as far as possible, from a social angle. For instance, in history there should not be a mere mechanical learning of names and dates in the past. "The ethical value of history teaching," Dewey maintains, "will be measured by the extent to which past events are made the means of understanding the present—affording insight into what makes up the structure and working of society to-day."⁵ In the same way, in the study of mathematics the science of numbers should not be taught as an end in itself; the student should get a consciousness of the use and purpose of number in our social organization. So we may go through all the subjects in the curriculum. "Ultimate moral motives and forces are nothing more or less than social intelligence—the power of observing and comprehending social situations—and social power—trained capacities of control—at work in the service of social interest and aims. There is no fact which throws light upon the constitution of society, there is no power whose training adds to social resourcefulness, that is not moral."⁶

It seems to be quite generally conceded that the direct teaching of ethics, and still more, of religion in any form, would be not only useless but harmful in high schools, although it is agreed that in colleges and universities there should be courses in ethics. Professor Palmer points out why such instruction should be avoided. He shows the danger in making a boy or a girl morally self-conscious. His remarks are so much to the point as to be worth quoting at some length. He says:

"That self questioning spirit springs up which impels its tortured possessor to be continually fingering his motives in unwhole-

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

some pre-occupation with himself. Instead of entering heartily into outward interests, the watchful little moralist is 'questioning about himself whether he has been as good as he should have been, and whether a better man would not have acted otherwise.' No part of us is more susceptible of morbidness than the moral sense; none demoralizes more thoroughly when morbid. The trouble, too, affects chiefly those of finer fibre. The majority of healthy children harden themselves against theoretic talk, and it passes over them like the wind. Here and there a sensitive soul absorbs the poison and sets itself seriously to work instilling duty as the main-spring of its life. We all know the unwholesome result: the person from whom spontaneity is gone, who criticizes everything he does, who has lost his sense of proportion, who teases himself endlessly and teases his friends—so far as they remain his friends—about the right and wrong of each petty act. It is a disease, a moral disease, and takes the place in the spiritual life of that which doctors are fond of calling 'nervous prostration' in the physical. . . . The wise teacher will extirpate the first sproutings of the weed; for a weed more difficult to extirpate when grown there is not. We run a serious risk of implanting it in our children when we undertake class instruction in ethics."⁷

In the psychological aspects of character training, it should be remembered that, as Dewey says, "all conduct springs ultimately and radically out of native instinct and impulses."⁸ Therefore, the teacher should understand these instincts and impulses in order to know what to appeal to and build upon. Although individuals differ, each has a primary equipment of impulse—an urge to do. This is a fundamental factor in character training, because character implies the ability to participate constructively in the actual conflicts of life. "The problem of education on this side," Dewey believes, "is that of discovering what this native fund of power is, and then of utilizing it in such a way (affording conditions which both stimulate and control) as to organize it into definite conserved modes of action—habits."⁹

Other factors which must be considered are, on the intellectual side, judgment or good sense—the capacity to judge of values; and

⁷ Geo. H. Palmer, *Ethical and Moral Instruction in Schools*, pp. 17-18.

⁸ Dewey, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

on the emotional side, a personal responsiveness, a sensitiveness to conditions, a regard for the ends and interests of other people. The aim of the school should be to afford an opportunity for the development of all these factors in character training.

Professor Coe emphasizes the importance of cultivating the student's variability in a constructive way. "Education, then, is to aim at variability in the student, a cultivated variability. The youth brings to high school and college the precious treasures of youth, a feeling that the world is not finished and done, but in the making, and that he himself is not finished and done, but in the making. He is hospitable to changes in the world and in himself. Right here, in the natural variability of youth, the possibility of a progressive civilization chiefly lies. In the human species, and in it alone, is there provision for voluntary variation, for foresighted progress; for evolution by the economical process of analysis, discrimination, and agreement, as against the wasteful processes of chance and of strife. And youth, itself changing from the relative irresponsibility of childhood to the self-guidance of maturity, is the ever-renewed organ of this part of the creative process. What does education do with this infinitely precious gift of God? What ought education to do with it? Answer for yourself. Do our high schools and colleges tend, on the whole, to keep alive the youth's readiness for variation? Do they cultivate his variability, or leave it impulsive, immature, narrow? Do they, perchance, rob him of his variability and make of him a piece of conventional furniture?"¹⁰

A novel experiment is being conducted at the University of Wisconsin in the experimental college recently inaugurated under the direction of Professor Meiklejohn, former president of Amherst. Under this plan, as I heard him explain it, two hundred youths are engaged in a species of co-operative study. The students do not register for an assortment of "elective" courses; on the contrary, they take a whole field of human culture, in some historical period, and ascertain how men and women adapted themselves to their environment in that period, applying to present-day problems the lessons they have learned. During the first year of the experiment, said Dr. Meiklejohn, the cultural epoch selected was Ancient Greece; next year it may be the Middle Ages.

This brings us to a vital way in which character development

¹⁰ Geo. A. Coe, *What Ails Our Youth?* p. 46.

may be fostered: through student co-operation; i. e., giving the members of a class practical problems to work out in groups. Various forms of student self-government offer further opportunities for developing responsibility and initiative. There is also a rich field for character training through activities such as membership in orchestras or glee clubs, participation in publishing the school or college paper, managing a school bank, making flower-boxes and apparatus for the laboratory, and so on. These activities inculcate unselfishness, loyalty, co-operation, and the spirit of service. "Nor should it be overlooked," says Neumann, "that services of this kind draw the pupils more closely to their school. It is a matter of familiar observation that people are apt to become more firmly attached to an institution by reason of what they themselves do for it than by virtue of what it does for them. Young people who have helped to build a school playground or prepare a school garden are much more likely to keep the grounds in good shape than are those who come into a place where everything has been made ready for them beforehand. Like adults they cherish that to which they have given themselves."¹¹

A striking illustration of the constructive results of this sort of student activity is given by a case wherein the members of a civics class at a certain high school arranged for a series of public meetings with addresses by experts, to arouse interest in community improvement. As a result of these meetings, they helped to secure the establishment of a system of garbage collection, the appointment of a municipal nurse, the laying out of a park, and the provision of a bathing beach with bath-houses for the people of the community. Here was a fine example of training for citizenship through voluntary co-operation in work for social ends.

Recently the country has been shocked by the large number of college students who have committed suicide. During a period of about six months it was said that more than twenty-five such cases had occurred. The epidemic—for such it may almost be called—has not been confined to any one institution, nor to any one section of the country. Cases have been reported from widely scattered States, and the students have been enrolled at all sorts of colleges and universities, from aristocratic endowed institutions in the East

¹¹ Henry Neumann, *Education for Moral Growth*, p. 207.

to corn-belt State universities in the West, and at large schools and small ones alike. Most of the suicides were young men, but there were several girls in the list. Even the high schools have not been exempt from such tragedies.

Surely there must be something radically wrong when in a day and age such as ours, with unrivaled educational opportunities for youth and all the inventions of modern science which make our lives so much more comfortable than those of our ancestors, young men and women in the full bloom of adolescence should lose interest in life, see no object or advantage in going on living, and even find existence so unbearable that they resort to self-destruction.

All sorts of alleged reasons for these cases of *felo de se* have been advanced in the press, such as disappointment in love, discouragement over failure in studies, reading of occult literature, financial troubles, ill-health, and so on. It would appear that none of these reasons, except perhaps ill-health in some instances, really had much to do with the fundamental causes of the tragedies. Furthermore, since the cases of ill-health reported seem to have been largely mental, we have to go back farther to find the real cause of the trouble.

Careful analysis reveals that the problem is essentially one of lack of adjustment, a sense of bewilderment in the midst of a complex situation, resulting in brooding, worry, and mental aberration.

Nor is the genesis of the maladjustment far to seek. When a youth comes to college he is thrown into a novel environment, where he has to meet many difficult problems of conduct and to fit himself into the scheme of things. But he does not know how to "find" himself; or, as it is sometimes expressed, he is unable to "orient" himself to the new milieu in which he is placed.

In this connection, Professor Coe remarks: "The so-called 'orientation courses' for freshmen are a recognition of certain of these needs, particularly the need for thinking the different college subjects in relation to one another. The results appear to be good, as far as they go. They are signs of a new intellectual seriousness in some of the colleges. Much more, however, is necessary; namely, a critique of modern life, not only at the beginning of the college

course, but throughout it, and related to every part of the instruction."¹²

Take, for instance, the average boy from a small town, or even from an ordinary home in a fairly large city. What has he really learned about life? He has probably had a good bringing-up by his parents. He has gone through the grade school and the high school, where he has acquired a smattering of knowledge. His parents probably had little schooling themselves; they have believed in the efficacy of simple, old-fashioned rules which satisfied them because they did not have to grapple with the problems of this post-war and jazz age.

No doubt the boy was sent to Sunday school, where he was taught the old orthodox religious beliefs, and supposed that the Bible contains the scientific truth about the creation of the world and the origin of man. He read about Adam and Eve, about the Flood and Noah's Ark, about the Tower of Babel, and other Old Testament stories. He was taught, in addition, the creeds of his own particular denomination. But he learned little, if anything, about other churches and their different points of view, and of course nothing at all about the history of religion or modern Biblical criticism.

In science, at high school, his education was probably confined to a smattering of zoölogy, chemistry, and physics. He learned nothing of the revolutionary discoveries in astronomy, biology, and dynamics, from electrons and protoplasm to galaxies of suns a million light-years distant, and from protoplasm to man.

When the boy enters college he takes courses in geology and suddenly learns that the earth was evolved millions of years ago, instead of the six thousand of traditional Biblical chronology. He studies fossils of early forms of life, and he finds that life has been a slow and painful evolution through many aeons of time. He discovers that millions of years ago the highest form of life was the fish, followed by the amphibians, and then the age of reptiles. He sees in the museum the skeletons of great dinosaurs that roamed the earth in those far-off days. Then he learns how the mammals and the birds evolved out of the reptiles, and how all the different families of mammals—the horse, the dog, the elephant, the cat, the monkey—became specialized for different environments and

¹² Coe, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

habits of life. He learns, also, how the continents rose and fell, how the ice advanced and retreated, and how the great coal beds were laid down by decaying vegetable matter accumulated during untold thousands of years in the immense semi-tropical swamps. It is a strange and very bewildering new world to which our youth is being introduced.

Then, perhaps he takes courses in biology and anthropology, and discovers that man first appeared on the earth a million instead of only six thousand years ago. He sees reconstructions of Pithecanthropus, of Neanderthal man, the Piltdown man, the Heidelberg man, and various other specimens of early humanity. He learns, to his surprise, that man, instead of having popped up like Jonah's gourd in a night, slowly evolved through hundreds of thousands of years, from a creature that was half animal into *homo sapiens*.

All this naturally proves a severe jolt to his belief in the Bible as a whole. In a brief time he is wondering whether there is "anything in" the religion he was taught in childhood. In nine cases out of ten he quickly becomes a half-baked agnostic or atheist, for he has not the materials with which to work out a constructive religious attitude or philosophy of life to take the place of the discredited inherited faith.

Meanwhile, he begins to learn about sex. He probably reads many modern works dealing with sex problems, and finds therein facts about sex that upset all the old-fashioned ideas he brought with him from home. Indeed, the chances are that his parents taught him nothing about sex and allowed him to grow up in ignorance of this vital subject, until the sex-crisis of adolescence is upon him.

Such a young man usually is sound at heart; he wants to do what is right and honorable, but his old standards have been uprooted, and he cannot without intelligent and sympathetic aid construct new standards which will appeal to his intelligence.

What are we going to do about it? We must find some practical means to fit the student into his new world. Coe offers an excellent suggestion when he says: "What would happen if the whole of the high school and college curriculum were to be organized around such questions as these: What shall I need to do, and therefore to know, as a voter, a taxpayer, a married person, a

parent, a member of a church, a member of the community; especially, what are the unsolved problems of life and society, and what decisions may I be called upon to make? What are my resources for rational and lasting happiness? Why is there so much unhappiness? Why don't we get rid of ancient, recognized evils? What is valid, if anything, in Oriental judgments upon Western civilization? What is the relation of my present practices and habits to my future occupation, and to the well-being of society? Some such forward look toward the vocation of living is the thing that is needed to bring health to our colleges. Some colleges have taken steps in this direction, and the results seem to be promising."¹³

I have already spoken of the "orientation" courses. Probably this, for many colleges and universities, may prove to be the best means of attacking the problem. Such courses will give the student a broad, general survey of the new world in which he is living and show him its significance. He will be encouraged to read thought-provoking books of the day, and to pass intelligent criticism upon them, in the spirit of Bacon's counsel:

"Read, not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider."

Thus will he be assisted to "orient" himself to his environment, and to hook the new knowledge up with his own experience. And he will learn something about many things of which he had never thought before.

If he takes a number of such courses, he will be led to a new synthesis of knowledge. Although he may have to abandon many of the beliefs which he formerly held, he will find worthy realities to take their place. He will see his relation to his fellows in a constructive way, and will have the material wherewith to build a personal philosophy that will give a meaning and a purpose to life—at least for him. He will have a sense of the significance and value of human effort that will tend to make this a better world, not only for the present generation but for those that are to come after. In short, such a training will develop personality and character for the oncoming duties and responsibilities of life.

I have reserved for the last a discussion of the place of athletics

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

in character training. "The purpose of education to-day," says Hicks, joining the general chorus of educators, "is in a great measure directed to the making of good citizens. Athletics, when pursued with moderation, to a great degree solves the problem of physical development. It also becomes the laboratory where many of the good and bad traits of character are acquired—therefore its office in the moral training of the student. . . . The athletic field is the great common ground where every man proves his merit or worthlessness. It is the final analysis of character, and he succeeds or fails because of what he really is."¹⁴

But character cannot be developed by restraint, repression, or prohibition; it requires the atmosphere of freedom for its healthy growth. "The character of the boy," declares Ehler, "is determined most largely by the habits and ideals that are prevalent among those with whom he associates, the environment of his real life. Here is where he goes wrong or works out his own salvation. It is in the activities of this free life of play and through the associations and relationships that are here formed that the fundamental virtues or vices get their grip upon mind and heart."¹⁵

Since the influence of athletics and sport in general may be markedly for good or ill, the function of the athletic instructor is to give to those in his charge the right kind of leadership. A well-known athletic coach cites many instances in his experience on the athletic field in which, through personal contact with young men, undesirable character traits were eliminated and the right ones developed.

At high school and college age, competitive play is a dominant interest of the youth. Rightly directed athletics, therefore, offer unusual opportunities for character training. "This form of activity," continues Ehler, "presents daily innumerable opportunities for the practice of the precepts and maxims that home and school have taught. If the environment is favorable, the reactions tend to the establishment of right habits of thought and action. If the environment is unfavorable, anti-social, unethical and immoral habits will result. The environment is determined by the character of the

¹⁴ C. S. Hicks, "The Influence of Faculty Supervision on the Moral Effects of Athletics in High Schools and Colleges," *Journal of Proceedings, N. E. A.*, 1912, p. 1147.

¹⁵ Geo. W. Ehler, "Athletics an Essential Moral Factor," in *Journal of Proceedings, N. E. A.*, 1912, p. 1151.

leadership supplied." Given the right leadership, lessons of right and wrong can be driven home at the psychological moment, when they will make the deepest impression. "Athletics provide for an expression of youthful instinct and interest that is vital to the development of character. It is an essential factor in any scheme of moral education."¹⁶

The great value of athletics is in the development of the physique, on the one hand, and on the other in the building up of such qualities as courage and self-confidence and the teaching of the spirit of fair-play, unselfishness, give and take, team-work, quick thinking, loyalty to the group—*esprit du corps*. The art of "playing the game" is a schooling in social ethics. "What does a member of the football team care for battered shins or earth-scraped hands? His side has won, and his own gains and losses are forgotten. Soon his team goes forth against an outside team, and now the honor of the whole school is in his keeping. What pride is his! As he puts on his uniform, he strips off his isolated personality and stands forth as the trusted champion of an institution."¹⁷

Physical education, because of its unique value in character building, should be accessible in some form to every student, whether boy or girl. Good health is the necessary foundation for lasting success and happiness in life, and "a sound mind in a healthy body" should be the ideal for all. No less an authority than the late President Eliot, in an address to the incoming students at Harvard, said quite frankly:

"So far as I have seen, there is one indispensable foundation for the satisfactions of life—health. A young man ought to be a clean, wholesome, vigorous animal. That is the foundation for everything else, and I hope you will all be that, if you are nothing more. We have to build everything in the world of domestic joy and professional success, everything of a useful, honorable career, on bodily wholesomeness and vitality."¹⁸

The mental and spiritual fruits of good health are so obvious as hardly to need elaboration. "Other things being equal, boys and girls will bring to their tasks minds more alert, spirits more cheerful, and wills more energetic if their bodies are sound. Particularly in adolescence many are apt to entertain morbid fears which better

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1151.

¹⁷ Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁸ Charles W. Eliot, *The Durable Satisfactions of Life*, p. 3.

health can do far more to banish than continued exhortations to cheer up and be brave. The same may be said of other nervous disorders. Frequently they require most of all a proper physical regimen."¹⁹

All of the various factors that I have tried to summarize herein have their place in character training. The problem in every case will be to adjust one to the other so that each will be given its proper emphasis, thereby insuring a well-rounded development for every boy and girl.

¹⁹ Neumann, *op. cit.*, p. 295.